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SUBJECT: POSITIVE INTERACTIONS WITH KEREN LEADERS DURING RECENT FIELD TRAVEL/HEALTH FAIR

1.(U) Ambassador met with the recently elected Keren mayor, Tekie Kelati, on June 28 following the Health Fair held earlier that day (septel). Kelati, who has thus far been in office 55 days, laid out a six-point development plan for the city, focusing on: water security, capacity building, environmental protection, interconnectivity with other government entities, food security, and creating an overall master plan. Kelati additionally mentioned plans to rebuild the railroad from Keren towards Asmara. Before serving as the mayor of Keren, Kelati served as a zoba (regional) administrator in Gash Barka.

¶2. (U) Emboffs found the Keren authorities and community leaders (mayor, zoba administrator, doctors, youth leaders) to be motivated, engaged, and eager to work with the Embassy despite the steady stream of anti-USG propaganda to which the Eritrean populace is continuously exposed. Community leaders freely approached Emboffs with suggestions for future collaborative events and repeatedly expressed their appreciation for USG presence and cooperation in Keren.

¶3. (U) Keren is a major city located approximately 56 miles NW of Asmara with a population of 90,000. The city is a major hub for both the Bilen and Tigre ethnicities, with the majority of the people speaking either Tigre or Bilen. As Keren has greater access to Sudanese trade routes, both legal and contraband, Keren's local shops are noticeably larger and better stocked with goods than those in Asmara. Embassy personnel maintain regular quarterly contact with the community in Keren via the American Corner, which is colocated with the public library.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: In line with reports from other donor missions and UN organizations, Post finds that local administrators are more willing to work with the Embassy on community events and programs than their Asmara-based ministerial counterparts. The Keren Health Fair proved a success because of the buy-in of Keren's local leaders, not through any assistance of the central government. End Comment.

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